

Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, June 29, 2008
Trinity Church
Matthew 10:40-42

One of those winter Sundays, when blizzard conditions made some emergency adjustments necessary, I gave an impromptu sermon. I can't remember what the text for the day was, but it brought to mind an experience I had had many years ago at a Benedictine monastery. The circumstances are too complicated to explain just now, but I was invited by the monks and my friend, a Benedictine nun, to join the community in the office of Compline at the end of the day. I noticed that as the monks and their visitors processed two-by-two into the choir stalls of the chapel, they first revered the Christ present in the Sanctuary and then, each pair turned to each other and revered the Christ that is in the other person.

Recognizing the Christ that is present in each other: That was the theme of the gospel for that wintry Sunday. So far, so good; but later on, thinking about what I had said, a stunning thought struck me. So much in the gospels is about love for our neighbors, recognizing their humanity and Christ's presence -- God's presence -- in them, that I had missed the implications of that for myself. For if I recognize the Christ that is in someone else, that someone else is recognizing the Christ that is in me, whether or not I was aware of it!

That is the larger theme of the Gospel for today: "Jesus said, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.'" There is Christ in you. There is Christ in me -- invited or uninvited, recognized or unrecognized, welcomed or not. What a stunning idea!

What an alarming idea!

Our lives are messy. I know that mine is. Just as I was writing this, June came in to my study and said, "Whew, it's stuffy in here. Don't you want to open a window?" I said, "Yes, but the breeze will blow all this stuff around." And to myself, I said, "All this debris of procrastination!" It's a metaphor: Our lives are messy.

Michigan where I was College Chaplain for seven years. We had chapel services twice a week -- Tuesday and Thursday at 10:00 a.m., and attendance was required. Tuesdays were a worship service. Can you imagine giving a sermon - or sermonette --every Tuesday to 500 students, the huge majority of whom were there under duress? On Thursday, instead of a worship service there was a lecture, most often given by one of the faculty.

Howdy Potter gave one of the two or three lectures from that setting that I can remember; and it delivered one of those blockbuster ideas that changes your thinking forever after. And it is a metaphor for today's Gospel. Howdy talked about a mirror and he said, "Did you ever think about how a mirror works -- not, 'What does it do? We all know that; but how does it work?'" We think that images sort of bounce off the glass; but what makes it do that." Professor Potter's point was that we ought to question the ordinary things that we tend to take for granted.

But what about the mirror? As Howdy explained it, the mirror reflection involves not a passive bouncing off of light and image but an active exchange of energies. The light and the image entering from one direction excite atomic activity in the mirror that projects the image back. There is the Gospel message: When we recognize that God is present in our neighbor, what we receive in return is the active reflection of the God that is in our selves.